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Exploring the Relationship between Extensive Reading Instruction and EFL Learners' Reading Proficiency

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I. Introduction

1. Theoretical Background and Research Findings

Since the 1980s, the effects of extensive reading have been repeatedly discussed in the ESL/EFL environment worldwide (Hafiz & Tudor, 1989; Lai, 1993; Walker, 1997; Bell, 1998, 2001; Horst, 2005; Renandya, 2007; Macalister, 2008; Chang, 2011; Rashidi & Piran, 2011). In recent years, research on the roles of extensive reading in the EFL classrooms in Japan has gradually increased.

Krashen's Input Hypothesis is often cited as a theoretical basis for extensive reading. This hypothesis assumes that we acquire language by understanding "messages," so "comprehensible input is the essential environment ingredient . . ." (Krashen, 1989). He argues that "competence in spelling and vocabulary is most efficiently attained by comprehensible input in the form of reading. . . ."

Grabe and Stoller (2002), on the other hand, claim that "the most fundamental requirement for fluent reading comprehension is rapid and automatic word recognition," which requires many hours of practice in reading. Without "exposure to print," EFL learners cannot improve their automatic word recognition skills. Extensive reading instruction with a large amount of easily comprehensible text, as a means of imparting "exposure to print," is a reasonable teaching method. Koda (2005) makes a similar claim, arguing that "in the absence of adequate reading practice, word-recognition skills remain underdeveloped, and poor comprehension continues." Moreover, Samuel's Automaticity Theory (2006), which originally concerns L1 readers, can be applied to EFL readers. His model of "comprehension of beginning readers" explains that automatic decoding plays a vital part in

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developing reading fluency.

Some studies have found that vocabulary learning through extensive reading is beneficial for Japanese EFL learners (Robb & Susser, 1989; Shillaw, 1999). Yamashita and Kan (2010) reported evidence of improvement in word recognition efficiency measures, such as decoding, sight word reading, and [off-line] lexical meaning access. Yamashina and Tsurii (2011) demonstrated, using the on-line program called the CELP Test (Computer-based English Lexical Processing Test) (Kadota et al., 2010), that lexical access speed could actually improve after reading extensively.

In addition, there have been many positive findings about the affective factors (Takase, 2008; Yamashita & Kan, 2010) and Japanese university students seem to increase their motivation and improve their attitudes toward English through the extensive reading experience. Furthermore, other research results have indicated extensive reading has a positive impact on reading speed (Robb & Susser, 1989; Yamashita & Ichikawa, 2010) and many have claimed that reading comprehension scores increase and the participants' overall proficiency levels improve (Lemmer, 2006; Yamashita, 2008; Takase, 2008).

2. Extensive Reading Instruction

As stated above, extensive reading instruction provides the opportunity for EFL learners to read a large amount and appears to be one of the methods by which Nuttall's "virtuous circle of the good reader" (1996) (see Figure 1) may be realized.

Day and Bamford (2002, pp.7–8) summarize ten characteristics of successful extensive reading programs as follows:

1. Students read as much as possible, perhaps in and definitely out of the classroom.

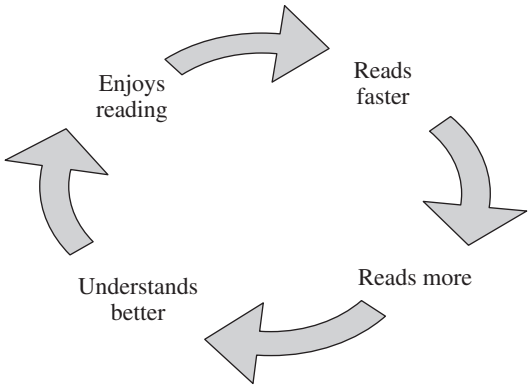

Figure 1. Virtuous circle of the good reader (Nuttall, 1996)

2. A variety of materials on a wide range of topics is available. . . .
3. Students select what they want to read. . . .
4. The purposes of reading are usually related to pleasure, . . . , and general understanding.
5. Reading is its own reward.
6. Reading materials are well within the linguistic competence of the students. . . .
7. Reading is individual and silent. . . .
8. Reading speed is usually faster rather than slower. . . .
9. Teachers orient students to the goals of the program, explain . . . , keep track . . . , and guide. . . .
10. The teacher is a role model of a reader for students. . . .

Almost ten years after the above publication, Day (2011) states in his lecture that modified extensive reading practices should be acceptable. He is, however, worried that "extensive reading" has come to mean many things to many researchers. He critically comments that some studies call even reading only several books a term, in which the participants do not select what they want to read, "extensive reading."

Admittedly, extensive reading instruction in the context of Japanese universities tends to have some sort of administrative or curriculum restrictions. In most research on such a population, the participants are only required to read out of the classroom, or to participate in just ten minutes of sustained silent reading (SSR) in the classroom (Akamatsu, 2006; Lemmer, 2006; Inagaki & Inagaki, 2008). Takase (2008), however, claims that in-class SSR is much more effective, especially for university students in Japan. Several studies have reported that they instruct the participants to engage in silent reading for much of the class time, but the participants in those studies have a tendency to be rather small in number (Yamashita, 2008; Takase, 2008).

Therefore, the present department-wide study has required all the students to read 30 minutes in the classroom once a week and also as many books or pages as possible out of the classroom. This has been the common approach among the reading teachers in the department (see section III for details).

3. EPER[1)] Placement/Progress Tests

In this pre-post design research, cloze tests called EPER placement/progress

1) Edinburgh Project on Extensive Reading (For more details see http://www.ials.ed.ac.uk/postgraduate/research/EPER.html)

tests (PPTs) were administered. Controversy still exists as to whether cloze procedures measure reading comprehension ability or not. However, according to Porter (1976), since cloze procedures were developed by Taylor in 1953, "varieties of cloze procedure have been used to measure reading comprehension, language proficiency, knowledge of vocabulary. . . ." The procedure was originally concerned with L1, but has later been discussed as a useful measurement of reading comprehension in the foreign-language-learning situation. Oller (1979) states "cloze scores were good indices of reading comprehension." In addition, ". . . it has been demonstrated many times over that cloze scores are extremely sensitive measures of reading ability. Correlations between cloze scores and multiple choice reading comprehension tests are consistently strong. . . ."

Yamashita (2008) covers EPER tests in detail (see also section III–3 in this paper), and states "PPTs are not strictly fixed ratio cloze tests, [nor] do they seem to be gap-filling." According to Alderson's (2000) categorizations, however, EPER PPTs can be referred to as the rational cloze technique, or gap-filling, rather than as cloze tests. Grabe (2009) argues that gap-filling measures (rational cloze formats) are much more useful than genuine cloze tests.

Extensive reading research in the higher education environment in Japan has made use of EPER PPTs to measure improvement in ability (Shillaw, 1999; Lemmer, 2006; Yamazaki, 2008; Yamashita, 2008; Takase, 2008, 2011). Yamashita and Kan (2010) have modified EPER PPTs to suit their research needs.

II. Research Question

The purpose of this present study is to investigate how the volume of extensive reading affects EFL learners' reading proficiency. The hypothesis predicts that there will be a significant difference between the pre-post test scores of the learners who read more books.

III. Method

1. Overview

At the School of International Studies where the authors collected data, extensive reading instruction is provided in one section of an English course. "English" is a four-credit course and is made up of four sections: Reading 1 (R1), Reading 2 (R2), Writing (W), and Oral Communication (OC). R2 is devoted exclusively to improving reading fluency through extensive reading.

The Extensive Reading Program in R2 forms a continuous 14-week sequence during the semester. The class meets once a week for 90 minutes of instruction. The

90-minute class time is roughly divided into three parts: 30 minutes for SSR, 30 minutes for SSR-related activities, and 30 minutes for other activities, including presentation and timed reading. Students are required to read at least ten titles and as many pages as possible during the semester, during and outside of class times, and to write a summary and impressions of the books they have read. Students' reading is carefully monitored through their performance in the class and reports submitted.

During the first lesson, students are given an introduction to extensive reading and how it is implemented in the classrooms. After extensive reading and its benefits are explained, a level assessment is conducted in accordance with the steps proposed by Kane (2006), modifying Waring (2000). It is often recommended that there be no more than two or three unknown words per page (Waring, 2000). According to the number of words they read per minute and the number of unknown words, students are able to determine their appropriate level.

The University library set up a section for graded readers at the start of the extensive reading program at the School of International Studies in 2010. It housed a total of 2,204 English graded readers from series by Macmillan, Oxford, Cambridge, and Penguin for the academic year 2010. Students were asked to take out more than two graded readers from the library according to their level and interest, prior to R2 class, and bring them for in-class SSR activity every week.

2. Participants

The participants were all first-year university students who were enrolled in English I and II courses. English I is offered in the spring semester, and English II in the fall semester. All students were international studies majors. They attended other English classes (R1, W, and OC).

As the present study is a two-semester study, only those who were present on all the three test days (in April 2010, July 2010, and December 2010 or January 2011, $N = 180$), and who submitted complete book reports and reading records were included in this study.

In the current study, we focused on the data collected from the students with TOEIC scores of 445 and above. Because the range of our students' language ability is too huge (students' TOEIC scores in April 2010: $M = 560.83$, $SD = 154.25$, $N = 218$), it is impractical to discuss the language improvements of all of the students as one set. In addition, according to the data published by ETS (Educational Testing Service, 2011), the average TOEIC score of Japanese university students in 2010 was 445 (IP Test). Hence, our subjects were decided to be students who had scored 445 or more in April, so that we could focus our study on above-average students. The final sample of students comprised 124.

3. Materials

Participants took EPER PPTs as pretests and posttests. This is a cloze test with a slight modification by "occasionally varying the frequency of the deleted words and . . . by allowing a specified range of answers" (IALS, University of Edinburgh, 1990, 1995). There are three parallel versions of the Test − Test A, B, and E − and these are said to be "designed to measure a complete range of English language proficiency" (ibid). For the current study, we used Test A and Test B with a counterbalanced design. Although the original instructions called for a test time of one hour, students were required to do as many passages as they could in 30 minutes, trying to fill in the blanks in sequence.

Test A has 141 items, and Test B has 147 items. The raw scores of each test can be converted to standard scores by calculating them in relation to a common scale with the use of the Score Guide contained in the testpack. The standard scores between different versions of tests can be compared directly, according to the "Notes for Users" offered by EPER.

The total number of words each student read during the two-semester-long program was counted on the basis of book reports and reading records. Students were required to complete and submit a book report after reading each book. In addition, they made a record of their reading each time they read: title, author, series, level, pages they read, time they spent, and comments on what they had read.

4. Procedure

To measure the students' language proficiency and improvements in reading level and reading comprehension, EPER PPTs were administered three times in total: at the beginning of the course in April 2010 (1004), in the first week or second week of the semester; at the end of the spring semester in July 2010 (1007), in the 13th week or 14th week; and at the end of the fall semester in December 2010 or January 2011 (1101), in the final two weeks of the school year. These tests were carried out according to a counterbalanced design: the students, who had been divided into two groups, took EPER PPTs Test A (1004), Test B (1007), and Test A (1101), or Test B (1004), Test A (1007), and Test B (1101).

Extensive Reading instruction was given over a two-semester period as described above. In the department, all the teachers should share the curriculum objectives for the English courses, and R2 teachers had an almost similar approach to attaining the objectives for the R2 course.

At the end of the 2010–2011 school year, after counting the number of words each student had read during the year, we performed qualitative research in order to verify the results we had obtained from the quantitative research. We asked ten students who read the most during the fall semester to participate in semi-structured

interviews for 30–40 minutes in January. The procedure of interview and data analysis was conducted using the "Modified Grounded Theory Approach" (Kinoshita, 2003).

IV. Results

All 124 students with complete data and TOEIC scores of 445 or higher were ranked according to the amount they had read. The 30 "Most Read" (MR 30) students and the 30 "Least Read" (LR 30) students were grouped and analyzed in terms of their EPER PPT score gains within and across each group. In addition, the relationship between the total word counts students obtained and their gain scores within each group were investigated and contrasted. Descriptive statistics for the EPER PPT standardized scores obtained in April 2010 (1004), July 2010 (1007), and January 2011 (1101), along with students' score gains are shown in Table 1. The table also includes descriptive statistics with respect to the total number of words students from each group read. The students' score gains were calculated as the result of the 1101 score minus the 1004 score.

1. Results of the 1004 PPTs

In order to affirm the EPER PPT scores, first, a Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to investigate the correlations between the students' April TOEIC scores and 1004 PPT. The correlation coefficients suggest a strong positive correlation between the TOEIC scores and the EPER PPT scores within the MR 30 ($r = .81$), as well as within the whole group ($r = .74$). Furthermore, the EPER PPT scores of LR 30 group showed a medium correlation with their TOEIC scores ($r = .53$). These results show that the 1004 EPER PPT measured similar English proficiency as the TOEIC and reflects the students' abilities in English when they started the program. Moreover, despite the shortened test-time of 30 minutes instead of the EPER-suggested one hour, the 1004 EPER PPT results placed each student at similar levels of the graded readers as the aforementioned Kane's level assessment (2006) on the first day of class. The influence of the time constraint that was imposed on the 1004 EPER PPTs seemed to be minimal, so the scores the students obtained were not adjusted to compensate for the shortened time. Hence, the 30-minute EPER PPTs were used as a measure to assess our students' proficiency throughout the study.

Although no score adjustments were made in accordance with time constraints, as mentioned above, the raw scores were converted to standardized scores common across each version of the EPER PPTs. Only the standardized scores are reported in this study. According to the "Notes for Users" offered by EPER, the MR 30 score

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics of the EPER PPT Results, Gain Scores, and Total Word Counts

Variable	M	SD	Min	Max
Most Read 30				
1004 PPT scores	34.60	10.05	17	57
1007 PPT scores	39.57	10.44	22	61
1101 PPT scores	45.13	10.40	22	63
Score gain 1004–1101	10.53	5.72	−2	29
Total Words	436,133	190,520	299,752	1,316,246
Least Read 30				
1004 PPT scores	24.80	6.14	14	37
1007 PPT scores	27.90	6.08	15	37
1101 PPT scores	31.73	8.10	19	50
Score gain 1004–1101	6.93	5.85	−1	21
Total Words	103,835	27,316	43,377	146,788

average of 34.60 points on the 1004 PPTs meant that the MR 30 students could read books at a level right between Level C (above 35) and D (below 34). Level C means Oxford Bookworms (OBW) Stage 3 (1000 headwords; fourth level from the bottom, following the "Starter" level, Stage 1, and Stage 2) or its equivalents from other publishers. By the same token, LR 30's 24.8 point average score placed LR 30 students in OBW Stage 1 (400 headwords) or its counterparts from other series of graded readers.

2. Total Words Students Read

The Total Words row of Table 1 represents the final combined word counts students read during the months between April and July (spring semester) and September and January (fall semester) during the 2010 academic year. The MR 30 students read a minimum of roughly 300,000 words, topping off at a maximum of just over 1,300,000 words in the two semesters. The average word count of 436,133 from the MR group roughly translates into 42 OBW Stage 3 books. On the other hand, some of the LR 30 students read less than 50,000 words, resulting in a group average of around 100,000 words. With this modest average, the LR 30 students are estimated to have read about ten OBW Stage 3 books during the academic year. Roughly speaking, the students in the MR 30 group read approximately four times as many words as those in the LR 30 group. The exposure to the English text for those in the MR 30 group was apparently far more extensive than for those in the LR 30 group.

3. Students' Progress Within and Across the Groups

As seen in Table 2, when all 124 students' EPER results were analyzed, a significant score improvement could be seen between 1004 and 1101 ($t(123) =$

Table 2 T-test Results Within and Between Groups

	t	*p*
ALL 124: 1004→1101 (dt = 123)	− 18.475	.000***
Most Read 30: 1004→1101 (dt = 29)	− 10.083	.000***
Least Read 30: 1004→1101 (dt = 29)	− 6.487	.000***
Gain Scores (dt = 58)	2.409	.019*

***$p < .001$, *$p < .05$

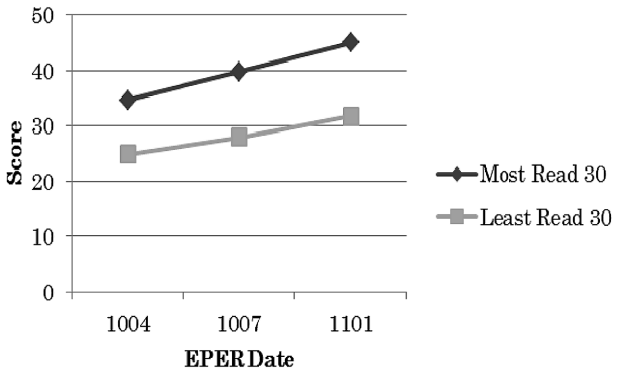

Figure 2. Average Progress of EPER PPTs Standardized Scores

− 18.475, $p < .001$), and as a whole, students accumulated the average total word count of 241,713. With the LR 30 students reading 103,835 words and the MR 30 students 436,133 words on average during the academic year, each group performed gradually better on the EPER PPTs as the school year progressed from April to January.

Figure 2 shows and stresses the significant improvement of the students' EPER PPT scores. There are significant differences between the PPT 1004 and 1101 average scores both within the MR 30 group and LR 30 group. As shown in Table 2, the result of the t-test with 1004 and 1101 mean scores within the LR 30 group indicates how significantly those students improved their scores ($t(29) = -6.487$, $p < .001$). The LR 30 student's original 1004 score of 24.8 indicating a suitable level for OBW Stage 1, as mentioned above, shifted up to 31.73, which indicates a move up to an OBW Stage 2 placement, at the end of the academic year, and clearly indicated a significant improvement in their reading ability.

With much more exposure to English books than the LR 30 group students, the MR 30 group students performed even better. As mentioned above, the MR 30 students' 1004 score of 34.6 indicated their appropriate level to be right between OBW Stage 2 and 3 or its equivalent at the beginning of the course. Then, their 1101 average score of 45.13 suggested that their suitable level shifted up to OBW Stage 4. The mean score average difference between April and January was also

significant ($t(29) = -10.083$, $p < .001$) in the MR 30 group. In sum, the MR 30 group read approximately 430,000 words throughout the academic year, and gained more than 10 points on the EPER PPTs on average, which shifted up their reading level by almost two levels.

4. Comparison of the MR 30 and LR 30

While both the MR 30 and LR 30 groups showed significant improvement in the end, their score gains showed slightly different tendencies. As seen in Figure 2, the progress of the MR 30 group seems sharper. The t-test of the MR 30 group's average gain score and the LR 30 group's average gain score proved the notable difference between them ($t(58) = 2.409$, $p < .05$). The MR 30 group students improved their English proficiency more drastically than the LR 30 students did.

In order to further attest the difference, a Pearson correlation analysis between total words and the gain score was conducted, and the MR 30 group's correlation coefficient showed moderate effects ($r = .31$). It seems there is some relationship between the total words MR 30 students read and their overall score gains. That is to say, as the students read more words, notably more than approximately 300,000 for this group, their score gains were higher on EPER PPTs.

On the other hand, though the LR 30 group also demonstrated their higher ability in January than in April, there was no evidence of a relationship between their word counts and their gain scores ($r = .15$). Even though these students may have done significantly better at the final posttest in January, their score gains showed no correlation with their word counts.

V. Discussion

The average scores of the EPER PPTs as a whole, including those of the LR 30 group, have increased over the course of the two-semester extensive reading instruction. The statistical analysis indicated there was a significant difference between the PPT 1004 and 1101 average scores of all the students. As stated above, the LR 30 group showed no significant correlation between word counts and gain scores while the MR 30 group had moderate correlation. The results suggest that there may be a threshold below which extensive reading has little effect on learners' reading proficiency. The average word counts of the LR 30 group, 103,835 words, did not appear to be sufficient to improve their reading proficiency substantially. In order to become a part of the "virtuous circle" (see I–2), it can be assumed that learners should read at least more than 100,000 words. Day (2011) gave a candid comment to researchers in the field of extensive reading (see I–2), and in fact the current study has confirmed that reading only several books a term is not extensive

enough to yield any apparent effect.

We administered pre-post EPER PPTs, asking students to try to read and answer as many questions as possible in 30 minutes despite the instruction by EPER to administer them in one hour as described above. By comparing the number of passages the students read within a fixed time limit between the pre- and posttests, we found that most of the students read more passages and filled in more gaps in the answer sheet of the posttest. We did not measure students' reading rate per passage, but we could say that students showed improvement in reading speed. Students' better results in the posttest might be due to their improved reading speed.

In addition, from the semi-structured interviews with ten participants who read the most, at the end of the 2010–2011 school year, we obtained comments on the positive effects they enjoyed by improving their English proficiency. The comments included the following: "I felt my timed reading record had improved halfway through the second semester. I'm not sure why. I just changed the way I learned English . . . , to extend the time spent in reading graded readers," and "I had improved my TOEFL score by 40 in one month. I'm not sure why but I feel the extensive reading program helped me raise my scores. During the semester, I devoted a large part of my time to reading graded readers."

VI. Conclusion

This study explored the possible effects of extensive reading instruction on Japanese college students. After two semesters of an extensive reading course, particularly with in-class SSR and activities related to the books those students read, overall average scores on EPER PPTs improved significantly. Considering the high correlation coefficient between TOEIC scores and EPER PPTs, both taken in April 2010, the EPER PPTs seemed to be an appropriate measure of the students' proficiency. The improvement of reading proficiency in general, among all 124 students including the Most Read 30 students and the Least Read 30 students, was attested to by the t-test results and their significant differences on EPER PPTs between April 2010 and January 2011. Another t-test on the mean gain scores between the Most Read 30 group and the Least Read 30 group also verified the significant difference and showed the positive effects on the students' proficiency for those who read the most in the program. However, the lack of a control group without extensive reading instruction, due to the curriculum constraints of the department-wide program, needs to be noted; hence, the limitation of the present study is inevitable. As such, the pure effects of extensive reading instruction cannot be isolated in this study.

Regardless of this limitation, the relationship between the volume students read

and their proficiency improvement within the Most Read 30 group and the Least Read 30 group was carefully analyzed to explore and better understand the effects of extensive reading instruction. Moderate correlation coefficients between the students total word counts and their gain scores between the April 2010 pretest and the January 2011 posttest in the Most Read 30 group were obtained, while no correlation between the Least Read 30 students' word counts and their gain scores could be found. The result suggests the possibility of the existence of a threshold as to how many words students need to read in order to improve their English proficiency with extensive reading instruction.

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